

Original Paper

EFFORTS OF HEAD TEACHERS IN LEADING AND MANAGING PUBLIC SCHOOL THROUGH DEVELOPING PROJECTS AND PORGRAMMES

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Abstract

The paper explores how school leaders of community schools lead and manage schools through the development of innovative projects and programmes creating an engaged learning environment at school. A visionary school leader has a dream of creating an engaged learning environment at school, for which an unwavering determination seems to be a must. The head teachers of the study are found totally focused on their task with full commitment and dedication. They are launching different innovative programs and projects at schools adhering to the notion of innovative school leadership, thereby drawing the attention of the local stakeholders. Like the intent of the theory of flow, these school leaders as campaigners of transformation are immersed in the affairs of school delegating responsibilities to team members. The paper further argues for the need of leading schools proactively and creatively so to create a vibrant learning space where students get opportunities to demonstrate their creativity.

1. Background of the Study

Most often we come to hear the grievances of head teachers that the teachers do not remain engaged in teaching-learning activities as expected. They hardly engage students in meaningful activities in the classroom. Indeed, engagement of teachers depends on how the teacher leads and manages the overall activities of school and inspire the team. Empowering and engaging teachers and students appears to be a prominent role of a head teacher at school. As a driver of school, they are expected to be mindful of context, shifting paradigms and practices happening around. A visionary school leader has a dream of creating an engaging environment at school, and the vision has to be manifested in leadership performance of the head teachers. Pertaining to developing school projects and programmes, a head

teacher needs to think of the following questions: i. how are school projects and programs are developed?; ii. who are involved in the development process?; iii. and what are the implementing strategies?

A head teacher as a school leader and manager is expected to focus on creating a conducive learning environment at school delegating roles and responsibilities to teachers and students. I would like to present an anecdote of my school where I work as the head teacher.

It was someday in the month of September 2020, I had a staff meeting with teachers. The key agenda of the meeting was how to engage students in the creative activities at school. I encouraged teachers to come up with creative plans and ideas for the meaningful engagement of students. The teacher came up with different creative ideas. Our science teacher proposed to begin 'Innovative Science Project'. I appreciated his ideas and requested him to prepare a proposal including tentative budget for the project. After few days, he submitted a proposal with a budget of Rs. 30,000. I got it approved in the meeting of the SMC and released the budget. Then he along with his team members purchased the necessary items required for the project. A team of four members were/are engaged in the project. The team started engaging students in practical activities such as drawing session using drafter tool, drawing 3D alphabets, tangram and alphabet construction using hard paper broad and so on.

The students were/are keenly engaged in the activities. The parents are glad to know about the engagement of students in creative and practical activities. As the HT, I am glad that I am able to inspire the team of teachers. This is an example of a project successfully launched at school. The students are found working even after school and at home as well.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore how head teachers lead and manage public schools through developing projects and plans ensuring creative engagement of teachers and students.

3. Research Questions

The study was based on the following research question:

How do head teachers lead and manage public school through developing projects and plans?

4. Theoretical Referents

We employed the lens of lead by example and flow theory to explore the efforts of head teachers to bring transformation at school through the development of innovative projects and programmes.

4.1 Lead by Example

Lead by example is a unique living approach to leadership proposed by Baldoni (2008). Getting to the heart of leadership, this approach proposes that a great leadership is always inspirational for others and drives creativity through influence and action visualizing a bid picture of an organization. In this regard, Baldoni (2008) outlines that a leader as an in charge or the driver of an organization needs to set the

right example, act the part, handle the tough situations and stuff daring greatly, put the team first being accountable and duty bound for their actions and on the top of that a leader needs avoid the blame game abiding by the ethos of accountability and integrity come what may in the mission of chasing the dream of the organization.

4.2 Flow Theory

Flow refers to the state of mind in which an individual is totally involved, immersed and concentrated on what they are performing. It unfolds the secret of happiness encouraging people to remain focused on their task. In this regard, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) highlights that “the best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times...the best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (p. 3). Flow is a state of consciousness with optimal engagement and experience to unfold creative abilities.

5. Research Setting and Participants

Two head teachers from two different districts of Nepal were purposively selected for the study. The pseudo names are used to represent the participants and their schools. Ms. Ranjita is the head teacher of Janata sec. school, Kathmandu. She has been serving in the capacity of the head teacher for five years. She is dynamic and seems quite committed to bringing transformation at school. She avails her time and effort to create an engaging learning environment at school. Another participant Mr. Suman is the head teacher of Lokpriya Secondary School in Surkhet district of Nepal. He has been serving there for more than 30 years in the capacity of the head teacher. He is a change maker in the true sense of the term. He is a campaigner of the project “Earning while Learning” in Nepal- a school where students do not only learn but earn as well. Earning while learning has been the brand or mantra of this school.

6. Information Generation Strategies

The data/information was generated through interview with the participants. They provided enriching information and projects and their efforts to manage those innovative projects making an impact in the school as well as community.

Developing Innovative Programs and Projects

Regarding different programmes and projects being launched at school, Ms. Ranjita shares:

We have been conducting different programmes and projects at school for the engagement of teachers and students. We have formed STEAM club, Eco-club, Child club, DRR (Disaster Risk Reduction) club to engage students in creative as well as awareness generating activities and develop their leadership capability. A teacher is assigned the responsibility as the focal teacher of each club. They support students and coordinate with the school administration to conduct different activities of the respective club.

Regarding the activities of STEAM club, students are involved in design thinking project. They work in

maker space as well. The students share the activities and experiences with school teachers, stakeholders and other organizations such Plan International, Karkhana and so on. Sometimes our students get a chance to share at international level as well. Technology has made it possible to learn all the way different countries staying in the classrooms of our school. Recently our students took part in space art competition organized by Nepal Astronomical Society on the occasion of the 9th space week. Our students made model space crafts and presented them in the exhibition and were able to bag the first prize. It was proud moment for all of us. The students involved in eco club have maintained a garden and they also conduct programs related to sanitation and environment conservation.

Ms. Ranjita delegates responsibilities to teachers and encourages them for the meaningful engagement of the students in the activities they carry out. The students are also provided opportunities to develop their leadership capability. She seems totally focused on the activities of school. In a similar vein, Harris and Muijs (2004) mention that successful improvement is the outcome of the ability of the leadership to manage change and development at school.

Similarly, Mr. Suman shares about programs and projects being launched at school as:

Our school has been launching the project “Earning while learning” for five years. We made huge efforts to launch this project. Many people thought that it was next to impossible to launch such project at school. But we made it happen. These days, our students are engaged in productive activities such as vegetable farming, poultry farming, goat rearing, fish farming, bee- keeping and so on. The school provides loan to the students at nominal interest. They earn and pay back later. The students are able to get practical knowledge and life skill. The students are doing well in their studies as well.

Being worried by the fact that most of agricultural products are imported from other countries, Mr. Suman makes a commitment to come up with some innovative plans. As a result, he is able to launch the project ‘Earning while learning’ at his school. Mr. Suman is an innovative school leader with a passion for change who is able to inspire the team and unleash creativity as viewed by Salone (2007). He has been able to connect learning to entrepreneurship.

Creating Engaged Environment at School

Regarding her efforts as the head teacher to create an engaging learning environment at school, Ms. Ranjita shares:

I think the most powerful place in the world is the engaged classroom. We put every effort to ensure creative engagement of students at school. We have activity board in each classroom to display the creative works of the students. The students feel inspired to see their work on the display board. Our students of grade ten shared experiences on present practices of our school regarding disaster risk management with the students of Japan, Philippines, and Thailand. It was a great experience for all of us.

We have initiated a program entitled “Teaching Learning Improvement Project” to update our teachers. We conduct trainings on various subjects inviting the experts of the respective subject. One special feature of our school is that whenever we are free, we remain busy in training and different professional

developmental activities. I believe that only updated teachers can facilitate students to unleash their potential. Frequent sharing has helped us to enrich our understanding on different recent pedagogical approaches.

Similarly, Mr. Suman shares how he is able to convert his school into a living learning centre:

Our dream project has been materialized. The school manages land and the loan. The students from grade four to grade twelve are involved in productive activities. They are happily engaged in the productive activities. They are not only getting theoretical knowledge at school, but also practical knowledge and life skills. They become independent financially while continuing their studies. The teachers have a schedule for classroom teaching and field activities.

Based on the sharing of the head teachers, it appears that high degree of involvement and collaboration of teachers and students is the lever for change schools (Harris & Muijs, 2004). He is able to convert his school into an engaged learning centre.

Sustainability of the Programmes and Projects

Regarding sustainability of the projects and programs at school, Ms. Ranjita shares:

We have resource limitation for the sustainability of any project. My mission is to empower and update teachers for the sustainability of the projects and programs at school. When teachers have expertise, they can support to run the projects. Regarding technical and financial support, we collaborate with different organizations and local government.

Ms. Ranjit gives huge priority for the capacity building of teachers. She firmly believes that only updated teachers can support students in a meaningful manner. Her ideas align with the views of Harris and Muils (2004) who mention that “capacity building is concerned with creating opportunities and experiences for development and mutual learning” (p. 37). When teachers are empowered, they can make a difference.

Considering sustainability of the projects and programs what a leader needs to think of, Mr. Suman shares:

Sustainability of any project is a huge challenge. The project of our school has become the talk of the town now. I was awarded by the Government of Nepal for successfully launching the project ‘Earning while Learning’. Many people thought I would not be able to implement this project. We made a huge effort to materialize this dream project. I turned deaf to the disempowering beliefs of the people. To sustain this project, our plan is to have a fixed deposit of certain amount and not to let the trust of the community go down. Whatever the name and fame the school has earned now, it has been possible through the support and engagement of the people of the community and hard work of our students.

Mr. Suman has a plan to save some amount as fixed deposit to sustain the projects and programmes at school. On the top of that, he believes continued trust and feeling of ownership of the members of community will help to sustain the projects and programs of school. In fact, Lokpriya school has been a living laboratory for students. The school has demonstrated its vision of connecting education to agriculture and animal husbandry honing the competence of students to be engaged in entrepreneurial

activities at local level. They are getting a chance to connect learning to life. Earning while learning has been an exemplary project set by school. The head teacher follows the *theory of turning deaf for good* to encounter disempowering beliefs of people. This is a living theory that helps anyone to move ahead with commitment akin to an adage- the dogs bark, but the caravan moves on.

7. Key Insights

A school cannot be sustained and developed through academic activities only rather different projects and programmes are to be formulated for the holistic development of the students as well as the teachers. Whether it is a public or private school, the head teachers can lead and manage school through developing projects and programmes. With reference to the headteachers of the public schools, students were found very creative through STEAM club where they involved in design thinking project. They learned creative designs with the help of such organizations like Plan International and Karkhana. Moreover, Eco Clubs and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) programmes engaged students and teachers in maintaining gardens and organizing programs related to sanitation and environment conservation. Likewise, “Teaching Learning Improvement Project” was another prominent project that aimed to make teachers updated and for their professional development through the experts in leisure time. For the sake of sustainability of the different projects and programs financially and technically, the headteacher collaborated with the local government, experts, and NGOs and INGOs.

Innovative projects and programs consisting of local flavor is much appreciated when they teach livelihood and entrepreneurial skills. One of the participating schools’ “Earning while Learning” was a promising project where students could borrow money in a nominal interest rate from the school and they are taught vegetable farming and marketing skill. That project was found a milestone project that was able to be talk of the town project and flourished students with livelihood and entrepreneurial skill. The project was found sustainable and progressive with the collaboration of local community, moreover, they were found making a plan of establishing a fixed deposit for its sustainable development.

Both head teachers were found innovative, hardworking, and visionary. They not only created innovative and engaging projects and programmes for the teachers and the students but also managed them in financially and technically sustainable. They are able to present themselves as an epitome of leading and managing school by example launching different innovative programs and projects at schools. They are living examples of innovative school leadership who pay due focus to develop student and teacher leadership. They are glad that they are able to conduct innovative projects at school and involve teachers, students, and stakeholders. Akin to the intent of the theory of flow, these school leaders as campaigners of transformation are immersed in the affairs of school getting out of their comfort zone.

8. Discussion

Innovation, dedication, and collaboration lead a head teacher to launch different projects and programs effectively and efficiently in public schools of Nepal. Creative projects and programs such as STEAM club, eco-club, disaster risk reduction, earning while learning project, and teaching-learning improvement project are necessary to spread feel of ownership among teachers and students that leads to improve teaching-learning environment of the public schools. Launching such innovative programs and projects requires the head teachers' active engagement as stated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) — the best moments of one's life is when the person's body or mind is strained to achieve something difficult and worthwhile. The flow is an optimal experience of goal-directed and rule-bounded activities that require psychic energy and some sorts of skills.

The head teachers found more challenging to sustain the projects and programs than launch them. As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) indicated such projects and programs require tireless physical and mental effort for their continuous flow. In that note, both head teachers rigorously formulated ideas such as collaboration with local government, NGOs and NGOs, experts, and the community people. Moreover, some projects and programs were related to direct financial benefit with aim of production and sales. They could enhance livelihood skills and entrepreneurial skills of the students, and they could strengthen sustainability and scalability of the projects and programs.

Teacher leadership is another key to sustain such projects and programs in the public schools. Both head teachers play their roles as the representatives of the change rather than being the school leaders as expressed by Harris and Muijs (2004). Ms. Ranjita disseminated her work to the teachers and assigned a teacher as a focal teacher of each club. She let the focal teachers coordinate with the school administration and the students to conduct different clubs such as

STEAM club and eco club. On the same note, Mr. Suman also engaged community farmers as the facilitators in the "Earning while Learning" project thus it could be a talk of town phenomena. His leadership style is as Baldoni (2008) suggested — managers should clearly situate their proposals in the context of the well-being of the organization. And there should be inclusiveness while addressing a team or its members. Both head teachers could lead their teams by example due to proper planning and implementation with the teachers, stakeholders and the community people.

Both Mr. Suman and Ms. Ranjita could be said as the successful teacher leaders who could influence their teachers and students in different innovative projects and programs. As Cosenza (2015) stated whether a teacher could have an administrative authority, as per standard guideline of leader, he or she should use group skills to improve the educational practice; influence them in formal and informal settings; and support collective team mechanisms within their schools. In difficult situation Baldoni (2004) suggested to do self-analysis and be accountable for the situation. In initial days, when Mr. Suman generated idea of "Earning while Learning", most of the people discouraged him through demotivating words. As following the notion of *theory of turning deaf for good*, he heard himself and lead by example. Leading and managing public schools through innovative projects and programs is

really a challenging job for the head teachers, nevertheless, own eagerness, skill, dedication, and down-to-earth manner could lead them exemplary school leaders.

9. Conclusions

Head teachers can motivate and reinforce students and teachers toward school system by through developing different projects and programs related to teaching-learning and life skills. Students can be engaged in social and environmental activities through eco clubs and disaster risk management programs. STEAM club is a multi-dimensional innovative idea where students can explore creative works and projects. Teachers' professional development is another phenomenon to lead and manage school properly; head teachers apply different professional development project and programs in the leisure time like 'Teaching Learning Improvement Project.' When head teachers have eagerness, creativity, and ability to lead the team, they launch different innovative programs and projects that could be an example in the community. Local government, NGOs and INGOs play a vital role in sustainability of the programs and projects.

Students engage in a project even more enthusiastically when the project has direct economic benefit especially in rural areas. Like 'Earning while Learning' project is a farming based collaborative project of the students and the school with assistance of local residents. Students earn money for their education; they learn to work in a team and community; and get entrepreneurial knowledge and skills. On the one hand, the projects are financially and technically sustained, on the other hand there is a harmonious rapport among head teachers, teachers, students, local government, different organizations, and local residents.

Likewise, community ownership can also be fostered through involvement of the community stakeholders in programs and projects of the schools that leads to the sustainability of the projects and programs initiated by the schools. Innovative programs and projects attract students, teachers, and the community that strengthen teaching-learning environment. Head teachers can lead, manage, sustain the public schools through different innovative projects and programs. These projects and programs maintain good rapport among all the educational stakeholders that results in effective teaching-learning environment and socialization.

10. Implications

Leading and managing public schools has always been a challenge for the head teachers. This study provides knowledge to the head teachers of the public schools about what sorts of innovative projects and programs are to be launched to engage teachers and students in teaching-learning. Likewise, the knowledge on how to manage such projects and programs in sustainable way can also be attained by the stakeholders of the public schools. Likewise, this study could provide insights to the policymakers in formulating policies related to involvement of the local government and the donor agencies in the projects of the public schools. There is a need of policy related to taxation of the sales in the product

from the public schools like vegetable, fruits, instructional materials, stationery, and so on.

The approach of this study is a narrative inquiry. Since there were specific projects and programs in the schools, case study, phenomenology could be other research approach for the future researchers. They could apply mixed method as well in order to quantify the return on investment in monetary aspect. Likewise, teachers' experience in innovative projects and programs, students' experience in same, challenges in application of innovative projects and programs, school-community partnership programs and projects are some subject areas where further researches could be done.

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